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Gerald O'Collins

Treasuring Karl
Rahner 1904–84

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A few years after Karl Rahner died in 1984, I heard a speaker in Rome pompously declaring that ‘he was *just* a philosopher’. He should have said that, like St Thomas Aquinas, Rahner was *also* a philosopher. In both cases, philosophy lent clarity and strength to their theological teaching.

At the end of the last century, it became a popular, self-promoting tactic for upwardly mobile clergy to assert loudly that Hans Urs von Balthasar had supplanted Rahner as *the* papal theologian. Ah, the politics of theology! In fact, examining closely many documents published by Pope St John Paul II, a doctoral student of the Gregorian, now a bishop in Ireland, discovered no evidence for any such special influence coming from von Balthasar.

The late Juan Alfaro, a close friend and collaborator of Rahner, admitted to me his role in drafting John Paul II’s first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of the Human Being of 1979). Rahnerian emphases showed through the text – not least (a) by using John’s Gospel to express the inseparable connection between the revelation (light) and salvation (life) brought by Jesus Christ, and (b) in the teaching on God’s free call to eternal life that affects the depths of all human beings. Rahner spoke of the ‘supernatural existential’, which the Pope expressed in more intelligible terms. Rahner could be dauntingly difficult to grasp.

Shortly after John Paul II published an encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Lord and Giver of Life), along with several other theologians he invited me to lunch. I seized the occasion to thank him for applying (over ten times) to the Spirit the language of divine ‘self-communication’. ‘But I didn’t take the term from Rahner,’ he retorted. His reaction showed that the Pope knew Rahner’s theology. He hinted that he was aware of the term’s long history, which took it back through modern philosophers and Thomas Aquinas to an earlier stage of European thought.

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The theme of the personal self-communication of God holds together the divine revealing and redeeming activity. Revelation is not primarily the disclosure of hitherto unknown truths *about* God but the self-manifestation *of* the Holy Trinity. God becomes present through the gift of revelation and the inseparable offer of salvation. Secondly, to be sure, revelation involves knowing new truths about God. But, *primarily*, it means knowing or experiencing God rather than knowing about God.

When the Second Vatican Council began in 1962, an influential paper written by Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger proposed this personal view of revelation as theologically primary and supported by biblical and pastoral considerations. Rahner's ideas on revelation, tradition, and the inspiration of Scriptures shone brightly as the Council opened and developed.

When a conclusive elaboration of the constitution on divine revelation threatened to be out of reach, in March 1964 a special sub-commission was formed which included nineteen theological specialists or *periti*. They included Yves Congar, Alois Grillmeier, Rahner, Ratzinger, and a much overlooked but widely influential expert, Pieter Smulders. The sub-commission was arguably the most brilliant group ever gathered to shape a Vatican II document. It did its work well. The final text, developed by them in the light of proposals coming from the bishops, was approved 2,344 votes to 6 in the final voting on 18 November 1965.

From the close of Council and into the following decades, the ideas of Rahner shone brighter than ever. In the late seventies René Latourelle, who spent twelve years as dean of theology at the Gregorian University (Rome), enlisted me in preparing a landmark volume that appeared in half a dozen languages, including English: *Problems and Perspectives in Fundamental Theology* (Paulist Press, 1982). 'Could you visit Rahner in Munich?', Latourelle asked. 'Once he accepts our invitation', Latourelle explained. 'anyone else we invite will jump at the chance of appearing alongside him'.

When I headed north to Germany and called on Rahner, he agreed at once to be part of our team. I rose to leave. But he insisted on our taking a walk around Munich and finishing with an Irish coffee in a skyscraper overlooking the city. I relished the idea of discussing theology with someone who had a constructive theological mind of his own. But Rahner diverted attention to friends teaching at the Gregorian University and elsewhere in Rome. He wanted to hear all the latest news from the eternal city.

Before I began full time teaching at the Gregorian in 1974, Rahner had lectured there. Among the other Germans, both Catholic and Protestant, who unflinchingly accepted invitations to

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come as visiting professors, was Jürgen Moltmann. Famous for his theology of hope and theology of the cross, Moltmann had no hesitation in telling me one day: 'Rahner has been the leading theologian of our century'.

FOUR THEMES

Rahner's thinking consistently carried a wealth of meaning and exercised wide influence. Four themes sum up *some* major areas of his reflection.

First, right to the end he continued to think on a world scale. In a lecture delivered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, shortly before he died, he described Vatican II as 'the coming of the global church'. What has happened with the election of a Polish, a German and an Argentinian pope symbolized the coming of a world church. So too has the growth of the Church in Africa and Asia.

Rahner's global church conveys a vision of eternal life for 'all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly' (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 22). It is a church that understands St Paul's dictum's 'Christ died for all' (Romans 8:32) to mean: 'the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of sharing in the Easter mystery' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

Leo O'Donovan, who had been closely associated with Rahner in Germany and in the USA, chose *A World of Grace* (Georgetown University Press, 1995) for the title of a book he edited on Rahner's theology. The title caught Rahner's vision of the world. O'Donovan, incidentally, was the clergyman who millions saw providing a prayer at the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

What Rahner called the 'supernatural existential' meant that the world is truly a world of grace. The Holy Spirit, with questions and inspirations, is constantly active in the hearts of all people. For a time Rahner wrote of 'anonymous Christians', but abandoned that terminology when he glimpsed its disadvantages. Rahner's vision of a world of grace does not stand or fall with a terminology he used for a time and then dropped.

Second, Rahner led theologians in his knowledge of sacramental reconciliation. He was convinced that a healthy practice of the sacrament called for collective reconciliation. But, sadly, the form of penance called 'the third rite' remains blocked, and the sacrament has been widely abandoned.

Third, Rahner's study of mysticism led him to recognize how widespread mystical experiences are. The data of the Oxford-based Religious Research Institute, founded in 1969 by Sir Alistair Hardy, bore out the view of Rahner. Very many 'ordinary' people

reported what have to be called ‘mystical experiences’.

Fourth, Rahner spoke of the coming church as being also a ‘diaspora’ or dispersed community. As far as I know, he has not been invoked to illuminate the Covid-19 church or anticipate the post-Covid-19 church. But that is our loss.

Rahner is no longer a living voice in our world, But his ideas remain on glittering display in the 23 volumes of *Theological Investigations*, his 1976 masterpiece, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, and numerous other writings.

Water and Liberation. Fear can hold you back from so much, even from things that are good for you. Submerging yourself in water involves letting go of fear, even overcoming irrational fear so that you can enjoy the refreshing and uplifting sensation. It is no wonder that the image of water is used so often in the spiritual journey. Even Baptism, the first of the sacraments on a religious journey, is symbolised by water. This rich spiritual symbol speaks of dying to an old way of life and taking on a new refreshing way of being in the world.

- ALAN HILLIARD, *Dipping Into Life, 2021* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 64.